

**LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER:
NEW IDEAS FOR MANAGING THE SECTION 8 CERTIFICATE AND VOUCHER
PROGRAMS**

Prepared for: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Office of Policy Development and Research
Office of Public and Indian Housing

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Contract HC-18374

September 1996

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the directors and staff of the housing and other agencies who provided us with the information for this publication. In addition to the agencies featured here, staff from many others were also interviewed. We thank them for their time as well.

We would also like to thank several people from Abt Associates, Quadel Consulting Corporation and the Department of Housing and Urban Development for their input on site selection, and their careful review and valuable feedback on earlier drafts: Stephen D. Kennedy and Mary Joel Holin of Abt Associates; Marcy Fisher and Eugene Rizer of Quadel Consulting Corporation; and Deborah Greenstein, Paul A. Leonard, Jill Khadduri, Madeline Hastings, Gerald J. Benoit, George Hendrickson, and Margaret E. Burns of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Their assistance and insights greatly improved the content and quality of the document.

The contents of this publication are the views of the contractor and do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Department of Housing and Urban Development or the U.S. Government.

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LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER: NEW IDEAS FOR MANAGING THE SECTION 8 VOUCHER AND CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS

This publication presents a sample of innovative practices used by local housing authorities (HAs) in administering tenant-based rental assistance. The new ideas described here represent a mere handful of the thousands of well-run programs operating around the nation. These exemplary models show how the Section 8 certificate and voucher programs are being used successfully to meet the diverse housing needs of lower-income families. Housing authority directors across the country are making the programs more efficient and effective by simplifying, automating, and streamlining administrative procedures. They are reacting to new challenges and making tenant-based assistance more responsive to the needs of program participants and landlords and more supportive of healthy, mixed-income neighborhoods.

Overview of the Section 8 Voucher and Certificate Programs

Two decades of experience with the Section 8 certificate and voucher programs indicate that tenant-based rental assistance is an exceptionally effective mechanism for addressing the housing needs of low-income renters. The programs help very-low-income families rent safe and decent housing on the private market rather than subsidizing the construction and operation of low income housing projects. Families are responsible for finding their own housing and paying a portion of their income towards rent. Section 8 assistance makes up the difference between their contribution and the actual cost of the unit, bridging the gap between the cost of modest, privately-owned housing and the amount that the family can afford to pay.

Although the rent on housing secured by participating families must be comparable to that of similar, unsubsidized housing units in the area, families may take full advantage of the wide range of housing available, choosing housing that best meets their needs. Moreover, families may take their subsidies with them when they move. This feature offers low-income families the opportunity to move into healthy, safe, and economically stable neighborhoods or to move closer to family and friends.

The tenant-based rental assistance programs ensure that families are not forced to spend an unreasonable portion of their monthly income on shelter and free up limited family income to pay for other household necessities, such as food and health care. The family does not have to stop paying the rent in order to meet unavoidable or emergency expenses and can live without constant fear of eviction because they can't afford to pay the rent without assistance.

Because the certificate and voucher programs have been so successful in recent years, they are now used to supplement other federal and local programs to help very-low-income families who need both supportive services and housing. For example, Section 8 certificates and vouchers have provided critical housing support to families struggling to stay together

and avoid placement of children in foster homes. Tenant-based assistance has also been combined with intensive case-management and other services to help those suffering from chronic mental illness live independently.

The flexibility and efficiency of the Section 8 programs are enhanced by the programs' decentralized administrative structure. The programs are administered by over 2500 state and local housing authorities, operating under the general oversight and common program rules required by Federal law and regulation. The national scope of the program ensures that all tenant-based rental assistance programs across the country help families in the same way. The programs serve as a broad-based social safety net for very-low-income families, helping them pay for standard, "middle of the market" private housing in all parts of the country. Yet, the programs' decentralized administrative structures enable local housing directors to adapt operating practices to local needs.

Tenant-based rental assistance is helping to address some of the most severe housing problems in this nation. As of 1993, 5.3 million poor households had "worst-case" housing needs. Families with worst-case housing needs suffer from high rent burdens, paying more than 50 percent of household income for rent, live in physically inadequate housing, or are homeless. Affordability is the most prevalent "worst-case" need. Four out of five households with worst-case needs live in homes that are physically adequate and uncrowded, but pay more than half of their monthly income for rent.

Such figures indicate that the primary causes of severe housing problems in the U.S. today are lagging incomes and high housing costs, not broad-based housing shortages. The number of housing units affordable to extremely low-income families, those with incomes below 30 percent of area median income, fell by 425,000 units between 1985 and 1993. However, during the same period, the housing market added 1.8 million rental units affordable to households with incomes between 50 and 80 percent of median income. Most of these units can be made affordable to families with worst case housing needs if those families have tenant-based rental assistance.

Successes of Tenant-Based Rental Assistance

Certificate and voucher holders operate like other renters in the private market. Owners of apartments and houses for rent accept them as they would any other tenants seeking housing. Owners are not obligated to rent to families and individuals receiving rental assistance. Like other tenants, certificate and voucher holders must meet landlords' screening criteria, pay their rent on time, and abide by the terms of the lease. Tenant-based assistance, then, offers low-income families the freedom to choose moderately-priced, private market rental housing, just like middle-class families and individuals.

The vast majority of households who receive certificates and vouchers are successful in finding safe and decent rental housing. The most recent study, completed in 1994, found that 80 percent of certificate and voucher-holders in large cities successfully secured quality housing. Success rates averaged 87 percent for cities other than New York and 65 percent for New York. Program participants from all racial and ethnic groups are equally successful at finding and renting quality housing, with success rates outside New York City ranging from 87 percent for African Americans to 92 percent for Hispanics.

Certificates and vouchers are meeting a wide variety of housing needs. Approximately 68 percent of those using tenant-based assistance are families with children, 16 percent are 62 years of age or older, and 17 percent are disabled. A demonstration funded by HUD and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, conducted in nine cities across the nation in the late 1980s, provided rental assistance to individuals with chronic mental illness. The demonstration showed that, with a combination of tenant-based rental assistance and appropriate case management, individuals believed to be particularly "hard to house" can secure private rental housing and live successfully in the general community. Similarly, the HUD-Veterans Affairs Supported Housing Demonstration (HUD-VASH) relies on tenant-based assistance to house homeless veterans suffering from mental illness or recovering from substance abuse.

Because certificate and voucher holders enjoy much greater choice about where to live than residents of public housing, they are less likely to be concentrated in distressed neighborhoods. In metropolitan areas nationwide, only 15 percent of Section 8 certificate and voucher recipients live in neighborhoods in which more than 30 percent of the residents are poor. In contrast, 59 percent of all public housing residents live in such neighborhoods. The integration of lower-income families into middle-income neighborhoods offers families an opportunity for upward social and economic mobility. Research shows that the children of families who move into mixed-income communities are more likely to complete high school, attend college, and find jobs that pay more than the minimum wage.

Improving the Management of Tenant-Based Rental Assistance

Although most housing authorities administer the certificate and voucher programs very well, a limited number of program administrators need to improve their delivery systems. Poor administration of the tenant-based rental assistance programs at the local level can discourage owners of good rental housing from participating in the program, can concentrate assisted families in economically-distressed or transitional areas, and can lead to irresponsible behavior by both owners and families. A small number of assisted families, engaging in criminal activity or serious and repeated lease violations, can give the program a bad image. This puts the benefits of tenant-based rental assistance at jeopardy for other families. In addition, program fraud and abuse -- for example when families conceal income or HAs make above-market rent payments to owners -- direct program money away from families truly in need of assistance.

A good example of the spillover effects of poor program administration is failure to adequately enforce "rent reasonableness" guidelines. Program rules stipulate that housing units for which assistance payments are made must rent at prices comparable to other, unassisted private market units in similar locations and with similar size and amenities. When these guidelines are compromised, program dollars are wasted. Less obvious but just as important, property management practices are affected in ways that can hurt individual neighborhoods and the reputation of the whole program. Owners and their rental agents may not screen Section 8 tenants as carefully, or move as quickly to evict them for misuse of the property, if the program is paying the owner rent that is higher than the owners could get on the open market.

Some of the laws and regulations governing tenant-based assistance have interfered with good program administration. Congress has been working with HUD to eliminate a number of the statutory requirements that have made the certificate and voucher programs incompatible with private rental market practices, inhibiting program participation by owners of good quality housing. Provisions suspended by the 1996 Appropriations Act include the requirement that an owner who accepted a single recipient of tenant-based assistance was then required to accept all certificate or voucher-holders who met screening criteria, even if that owner was appropriately concerned about an overconcentration of low income families in one property. Other suspended provisions prohibited an owner from terminating a lease, even at the end of its term, for reasons except good cause (which requires a formal eviction action) or verified business reasons, and a requirement that residents and HUD be notified ninety days before an owner could terminate a lease for business reasons. The suspension of these statutory requirements, strongly supported by owner advocacy organizations, will go a long way toward enhancing owner willingness to participate in the programs.

New Challenges

The Section 8 certificate and voucher programs now serve over 1.5 million households, 68 percent of whom are families with children. The program has truly come of

age, but scale poses new challenges. The program is no longer invisible, as it was during the early years of its 20-year history, when few people knew about it other than the families, landlords, and administrators who were directly involved. Now most community and neighborhood groups are aware that some families may be receiving assistance that helps them pay the rent. Misconceptions about property values and crime, associated with concentration of poor families in public housing, can lead to NIMBY ("not in my backyard") reactions to a single household believed to be "on Section 8." The program can become a scapegoat, blamed for the behavior of families who are not in fact program participants. Sometimes these reactions are rooted in fear and misunderstanding, when families not of the predominant race move into a neighborhood, or when children reappear in a neighborhood that had become a community of empty-nesters and retirees.

At the same time, there is a concern among policy-makers that the program does not always fulfill its potential for enabling families to rent housing outside areas of concentrated poverty, where schools, jobs, and services are most abundant. If a housing authority is not successful at recruiting private landlords throughout the community to accept certificate and voucher-holders, or if it does not encourage recipients to consider the full range of residential locations available, the program may cluster families in fragile neighborhoods. Families may not have a real choice of housing that can help them and their children grow in independence and self-sufficiency.

The welfare reform legislation enacted in August 1996 will create yet another set of challenges for administration of the certificate and voucher programs. Assisted families will have new incentives to move from welfare to work because of the introduction of welfare time limits. Some families now assisted by tenant-based rental assistance or on waiting lists will experience precipitous declines in income as family members lose their eligibility for SSI or Food Stamps. The institutions that administer income support programs will undergo change, and PHAs will be challenged to build new relationships, for example in the administration of the Family Self-Sufficiency component of the certificate and voucher programs.

A Vision for Change: Program Innovation at the Federal Level

HUD is committed to strengthening and enhancing tenant-based rental assistance. The Department is supporting the permanent repeal of statutory provisions that have made the program unattractive to some owners of good quality housing in good locations. Congress and the Department have also recently provided housing authorities with enhanced authority to deny tenant-based assistance to families who are abusing drugs or alcohol or have bad histories as tenants.

Recent experience indicates that tenant-based housing assistance can be effectively supplemented by landlord outreach and housing search assistance to expand opportunities for

choice and mobility. Examples of such programs are included among the best practices described in this book, and HUD has just provided seed money for 16 PHAs to develop additional models for regional opportunity counseling.

A major initiative to enhance the performance of tenant-based rental assistance will be the SEMAP or Section 8 Management Assessment Program. The SEMAP system will permit early identification of administrative problems and reward high-performing housing authorities. HUD will issue a proposed rule in October 1996 with a series of potential SEMAP indicators, which will be used to measure the performance of program administrators. Additional efforts already under way to improve the capacity of tenant-based assistance include contract management for the administration of several local programs found to have severe management problems and on-site diagnosis and assistance with the recovery of moderately troubled programs.

HUD has already implemented a quick-response system for use when the Department receives reports that over-concentration of assisted families may be having an adverse impact on fragile neighborhoods. HUD staff do an intensive on-site review to determine whether there is indeed a problem related to the Section 8 programs. Departmental officials work with housing authority staff, neighborhood groups, and city officials to take remedial action, when needed, and to counteract mistaken information.

Finally, in 1997 HUD will help welfare agencies and housing authorities respond to the challenges of welfare reform by implementing in a small number of locations a demonstration of new ways of using certificates to help families make the transition from welfare to work.

Local Innovation is Driving Program Improvement

Improving the administration of the Section 8 certificate and voucher programs depends much more on local initiative than on programmatic and policy changes at the national level. For some time, local program administrators have been responding to challenges and reengineering program operations.

Sometimes this means taking advantage of new technologies. For example, some program administrators have created voice mail systems that enable potential certificate and voucher-holders to verify on their own the status of their position on the housing authority waiting list. Other housing authorities use hand-held computers to schedule and conduct inspections and to inform landlords of defects that must be repaired for the unit to meet housing quality standards. Quick and efficient inspection can prevent a family from losing access to a good rental unit because the owner rents to an unsubsidized tenant rather than waiting for a lengthy bureaucratic process.

In other cases, innovations take the form of new relationships with other institutions: police departments for anti-crime initiatives; service providers for combining housing assistance with other supports needed by families or individuals; other governmental institutions for more efficient access to records of household income.

The purpose of this publication is to provide program administrators and others in the housing industry with a glimpse of some of the innovative and creative practices PHAs are using to improve the Section 8 certificate and voucher programs. This book is not intended to serve as a "how-to" reference guide. Rather, it is intended to intrigue the reader, to encourage informal self-evaluation that will lead to program improvement.

The book is arranged into sections by topic area, each of which addresses a set of issues faced by program administrators. Some of the topics include: meeting the unique needs of special populations, expanding economic opportunities for tenants, and improving landlord and community relationships. A number of "case studies" or sample models are described under each of the general topic areas. For example, three crime prevention models are described under the general topic "promoting safe neighborhoods." For each case study cited, a contact person is identified, should the reader wish to seek out additional information.

**APPLYING FOR ASSISTANCE:
SIMPLIFYING THE PROCESS**

Each household applying for Section 8 assistance must provide program administrators with various pieces of information to establish eligibility. Sorting applications according to priorities set by HUD and by the agency, updating information on applicants who move or whose circumstances change while they are waiting for assistance, and responding to applicants' inquiries about their status on the waiting list are all expensive, time-consuming processes that can be a significant administrative burden.

Because the supply of certificates and vouchers is limited and because there are so many eligible households who desperately need assistance, families may have to wait several years before receiving assistance. The average waiting time nationwide is over two years, and many housing agencies have much longer waits.

THE CHALLENGE

There is no way to eliminate the application for Section 8 assistance, nor is there any way to eliminate the waiting list. As long as assistance is need-based, and as long as supply is less than demand, these will be features of the Section 8 program. In order to ease the burden on agency staff and on applicants, program operators need to streamline the process for accepting applications, maintaining waiting lists, and providing information to applicants about their waiting list status in a cost-effective manner.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The practices described here were developed by housing agencies (HAs) to assist families applying for assistance, simplify the process of obtaining information on the waiting list, and reduce administrative costs. Innovative practices include:

- Reciprocal waiting list agreements;
- Fax machines and scanners to handle application taking; and

- Interactive voice response systems to inform participants of waiting list status and update information.

RECIPROCAL WAITING LIST AGREEMENTS

Each HA has a limited number of Section 8 certificates and vouchers, and agencies often give preference to families on the waiting list who live in the agencies' jurisdiction. By moving out of the jurisdiction, families can lose their preferred status (in those cases where agencies have a residency preference) and their position on the waiting list. The two HAs responsible for the San Diego (CA) metropolitan area modified their procedures to help families who move while on the waiting list for Section 8. Previously, applicants on the ***Housing Authority of the County of San Diego***'s waiting list who moved to the City of San Diego, which is served by the ***San Diego Housing Commission***, were required to re-apply for the City's program. As new applicants, they were placed at the bottom of the City's waiting list.

The HAs responsible for the City and the County of San Diego agreed to retain the original date and time of application when an applicant moved from one jurisdiction to the other. Now, when applicants on one agency's waiting list call to notify the agency they have moved, the person taking the call notes the new address. If the new address is in an area served by the other agency, applicants are notified of the residency preference and offered the opportunity to have their applications moved to the other agency, thus retaining the original application date. If the applicants decide to transfer to the other waiting list, the information is printed out and sent to the new agency with a copy to the applicant. This simple solution allows Section 8 applicants in the San Diego area to move between jurisdictions without losing their spots on the waiting list.

APPLICATIONS BY MAIL AND FAX

The ***Housing Authority of the County of Riverside (CA)***, with about 5,000 Section 8 certificates and vouchers, partially automated application-taking to reduce cost and improve efficiency. The HA designed the application form for computerized character recognition and developed a system for accepting applications by mail or fax and automatically entering them into the computer. The computer system includes a fax board, and faxed forms are directly read into

the computer database. Mailed forms are scanned into the computer. Thus, in either case, staff never have to enter information manually. The system generates a confirmation/update letter which is sent to applicants for verification. Applicants fax or mail back the letter with any corrections or updates, and the information is again directly read or scanned into the data file.

The system was used initially in early 1996 when the waiting list was reopened for the first time in four years. The agency advertised the waiting list reopening through public service announcements and notices in the newspaper that included a copy of the new application form. Ten to twelve thousand forms were received in the first few days. Although the computerized system did not work perfectly, staff were able to process the applications more quickly and efficiently, placing the large number of families onto the waiting list within a short period of time. Most forms required some verification because faxes weren't always clear and forms that had been photocopied did not scan perfectly. Even so, the time required to verify each form was usually only about 15 to 20 seconds, substantially less than the manual entry time.

Setting up the system cost about \$25,000, including printing forms, installing the network, and buying the hardware. All software was developed in-house. The system nearly paid for itself during the first two months of application processing, and it will certainly cover all costs for the ongoing receipt of applications. Plans are to keep the waiting list open indefinitely.

INTERACTIVE VOICE RESPONSE SYSTEM

Potentially eligible families frequently call housing agencies to ask for information on housing programs, to find out about their position on the agencies' waiting lists, and to update their addresses. Several agencies have installed interactive voice response systems to handle these routine requests. Two examples of such systems are described here, one developed internally by HA staff and one purchased.

Inundated with telephone inquiries from people wanting to know their position on the waiting list, ***the Housing Authority of Jefferson County (KY)***, with over 10,000 families on its Section 8 waiting list, needed one full-time employee just to handle the calls. The HA developed an automated computer system to answer housing applicants' questions about their status. Now, when applicants call, the computer "asks" them to enter their social security number, looks up

the relevant information in the housing authority's computer, and "reads" the information back to the caller in a synthesized human voice. The system operates 24 hours a day and averages over 300 calls per day.

In addition to staff time for programming and maintenance, the system required an initial outlay of \$1,000 for an older computer and a voice board. Because the housing authority no longer needs to pay an employee simply to answer waiting list inquiries, the savings in staff costs will quickly repay this outlay, as well as the cost of the in-house data processing staff used to develop the system.

The ***Charlotte (NC) Housing Authority*** (CHA) purchased an interactive voice response system, which is connected to the CHA computer system. Using a touch tone phone, callers can get recorded information on the various programs administered by the CHA. In addition, applicants can check on their waiting list status, get an approximation of when they will be housed, and verify their contact information. Using text-to-speech technology, the system spells out the information on file, and if it needs to be corrected transfers the caller to a counselor to update the information. While the system is in operation 24 hours a day, counselors and other staff members are available to assist callers only during regular business hours.

Overall satisfaction with the system is high. The automated system handles about 80 percent of applicant inquiries regarding CHA's more than 9,000 person waiting list. Staff are now free to focus on the issues that require specialized expertise. The total cost, including hardware, software, and programming, was \$22,000; the annual maintenance contract is \$1,800. CHA funded this management improvement using monies from the Comprehensive Grant Program, which is HUD's main funding source for public housing modernization and management improvement.

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**PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:
STREAMLINING THE VERIFICATION PROCESS**

To ensure that scarce Section 8 resources are granted to eligible families only, and to calculate the amount of assistance each family receives, program administrators must certify the income status of all applicants. The certification process entails verifying household composition, income, and qualified adjustments to income. At least annually, participants are called back for a redetermination of assistance level. This process requires housing authorities to collect and verify a large volume and variety of data.

THE CHALLENGE

The certification and verification processes are time-consuming for program participants and housing agencies. Participants must assemble the necessary documentation and submit it to the agency. Program administrators must schedule meetings with Section 8 applicants and recipients to conduct certification and recertification procedures, and they must verify all the information provided by applicants and participants. Housing agencies must find ways to streamline administrative procedures to utilize their limited resources more efficiently.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Methods for simplifying program administration may be very "high-tech," but simple solutions can also be quite effective at streamlining administrative procedures. The agencies described here have developed innovative ways to expedite various aspects of the verification process, including:

- Automated address matching and geo-coding to verify unit addresses so that participants can be called in for recertification in a timely manner;
- Automated verification of AFDC benefits;
- Development of an eligibility booklet to simplify third party verifications.

By reconfiguring systems or developing specialized software programs, agencies have successfully used in-house resources such as computers, fax machines, and programming expertise. Other far-reaching uses of technology to simplify administration are being developed as well. For example, the ***State of New Jersey Department of Community Affairs*** is now starting to develop a process for putting all Section 8 documents into automated form, using the enhanced graphic capacity of newer computer systems.

AUTOMATED ADDRESS MATCHING AND GEO-CODING

In order to maintain contact with families receiving Section 8 assistance, housing agencies need to have correct address information. ***The Housing Authority of Jefferson County*** (KY) has used automation to reduce the volume of returned mail, which had been a problem resulting from faulty address reporting. The housing authority implemented an address matching system that uses U.S. Census Bureau TIGER Line Files to validate and standardize unit addresses for all Section 8 tenants. Nearly all addresses can be corrected using this system, leaving only a small, manageable, number that need to be verified by a call to the landlord. If a legitimate address is not in the system, staff can easily add it to the data base.

As an additional benefit, once the address is confirmed, the unit's census tract, block group, zip code, and city name are also appended into the tenant's record. This allows the housing authority to create thematic maps to describe the tenant population and unit locations. An effective way of presenting demographics of the housing authority's Section 8 tenants, the maps have been used in grant applications and in interactions with local government. Finally, the housing authority has used the geo-coded addresses to map out efficient routes for its inspectors.

Jefferson County developed its address matching system using in-house data processing staff. The Census TIGER files for the county were obtained for a nominal cost; HAs with Internet access can download the TIGER files for free. The software used to produce maps can also be readily purchased.

AUTOMATED INCOME VERIFICATION

About 85 percent of ***the Housing Authority of the County of Merced (CA)***'s 1,200 Section 8 clients are welfare recipients. When initially certifying new households, and then at each annual recertification (as well as at interim recertifications when income changed), the housing authority had to ask the Merced County Human Services Department to verify receipt of welfare benefits. Over 3,000 such requests were made each year. The welfare agency had a staff person whose sole job was to handle these verification requests. Turn-around time for verifications was about three weeks.

The housing authority and the Human Services Department were able to replace this cumbersome process with a much more efficient automated system. Each month, housing authority staff use a modem to send a computer file listing the social security numbers of clients for whom they need to verify welfare receipt. The Human Services Department processes the file through its computer system, adding the needed verification information. The file is transmitted back to the housing authority within a week.

The modem system has been a relatively simple way to save both money and time. Because both agencies used in-house staff for system development, implementation costs were minimal. Processing of the verification information was greatly simplified, since the information was automatically entered into the system once a month. Now, nearly 90 percent of all income verifications can be completed by modem. The remaining 10 percent require some human intervention to deal with problems such as incorrect social security numbers.

ELIGIBILITY BOOKLET

The ***Housing Authority of the County of San Diego (CA)*** has developed an eligibility booklet to simplify the certification and recertification processes. The booklet is divided into two parts and consists of tear-out pages, along with corresponding simple instructions. The first part contains the personal declaration and questionnaire for rental assistance, which asks for household, income, and employment information. The second part of the booklet contains authorization and consent forms, including release of information forms and other documents designed to get the information housing authority staff need to certify eligibility. Once the Section 8 household completes the forms in the booklet, the housing authority sends the release of

information forms to the appropriate third parties and gets confirmation and verification of income and employment directly from these sources. This simple device helps the housing authority make sure it gets all of the necessary information and authorizations in one visit and saves the participants from gathering and submitting the information themselves.

The eligibility booklet has been well-received, and other agencies are looking at creating similar booklets.

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CONTROLLING FRAUD: LEVERAGING EXISTING DATA TO DETECT FRAUD AND PROGRAM ABUSE

Like any program that involves large sums of money, the Section 8 program sometimes attracts participants and landlords who attempt to establish eligibility and/or increase benefits by falsifying information. Fraud costs money and reduces the number of households that can receive assistance. To combat this, and at the same time protect the program's image, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1992 increased the incentive for housing agencies to recover fraudulently obtained funds by allowing them to keep half of the recovered amount. Typically, staff members may look for fraud in any of several areas: status of Section 8 tenancies; composition of tenant households; employment status of participants; and participant income.

THE CHALLENGE

Unfortunately, the investigation process itself makes fraud even more expensive, because staff must spend time following up on suspected cases. Thus, in order for housing agencies to ensure that limited federal Section 8 subsidies are delivered to those in need of and legitimately entitled to rental assistance, they must look for the most cost-effective ways to fight the problem. Agencies need to be creative in their investigations, taking advantage of existing data sources wherever possible to identify or follow-up on suspected cases of fraud.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Each of the three agencies described here was able to take advantage of existing data bases or investigation systems to create effective and efficient procedures to detect fraud and abuse.

The ***Prince George's County (MD) Department of Housing and Community Development***, which manages over 3,500 Section 8 certificates and vouchers, was one of the first housing agencies to create a Fraud Investigation Unit. The Unit seeks to weed out such problems as unreported spouses or other adult wage earners in the household, unreported or under-reported client income, and unreported side-payment agreements between tenants and landlords. Initial tips

come from agency staff who encounter inconsistent statements during interviews, from inspection findings, and from anonymous telephone calls.

With on-line access to credit bureau data, Maryland court and criminal records, and motor vehicle information, the Unit can quickly investigate possibly fraudulent behavior by tenants or landlords. Credit bureau data provide clues about the family's income; court and criminal records help identify applicants with criminal records who are ineligible to receive Section 8 assistance; and Motor Vehicle Administration files enable the Fraud Unit to determine whether unreported individuals may be living in the unit.

The Fraud Unit has paid for itself many times over. Through July 1996, the Fraud Unit had detected over \$925,000 in excess benefits, and in-house staff have generated over \$500,000 in collection notes. The remaining detected excesses were referred to outside collection agencies or are being prosecuted by the State of Maryland or by HUD. The agency uses its portion of the recovered funds primarily to support its Family Self-Sufficiency program.

The Unit's program compliance specialist has also developed a training presentation for other agencies interested in fraud detection and has delivered the training to other housing agencies, the Prince George's County Police Department, the Public Housing Authorities Directors Association, and the National Association of Housing Information Specialists.

The ***Dakota County (MN) Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA)*** manages about 2,000 Section 8 certificates and vouchers in south suburban Minneapolis/St. Paul. Its Fraud Detection Program initially consisted of an agreement with the county sheriff's department that allowed the agency to refer suspected cases of fraud for investigation. More recently, the county community services agency administering AFDC joined the partnership, and the three agencies are able to provide each other with mutual assistance regarding fraud related to public assistance, HRA services, and other issues of mutual concern. A partnership through which the three parties share information, the program encourages cooperation and accelerates detection. For example, if an AFDC worker suspects that an unreported individual may be living in the unit and contributing income to the household, she or he can provide this information to the housing agency and, at the same time, refer the case to the sheriff for investigation. The sheriff will

observe the unit, talk to the tenants and possibly their neighbors, and report back to both of the other agencies.

The Fraud Detection Program serves as a deterrent because people know that the County is serious about pursuing fraud. The HRA has referred over one hundred cases for fraud investigation in the past year; 20 percent of those tenants investigated have had their assistance terminated.

Since the Fraud Detection Program capitalizes on intra-county relationships and utilizes an interagency computer system already in place, it has required relatively few resources from the HRA. The only direct cost is a contribution of approximately \$8,000 per year to the Sheriff's department for investigator salaries.

The ***New York City (NY) Housing Authority (NYCHA)*** operates a Section 8 program with nearly 72,000 families and receives a number of tips each month about possible fraud and program abuse. Recently NYCHA established a Fraud Unit to coordinate various staff groups working on detection and investigation. An important aspect of this initiative is the unit's cooperative work with other agencies and organizations to match computerized income data for the members of participant families.

NYCHA typically needs to detect and investigate fraud in various areas, and access to different information sources facilitates this process. Some of the sources used to check possible instances of fraud are shown in the table on the next page. Sources such as utility company records, postmaster records, a reverse telephone directory, and health department death records are used to determine whether the Section 8 lease includes ***all*** the people living in the housing unit and ***only*** the people living in the housing unit. Dun and Bradstreet ownership records and the State Attorney General's Office records of incorporation are used to determine whether Section 8 certificate or voucher holders own businesses that are not reported to the Housing Authority. The Fraud Unit also uses computerized matches with welfare office and City, State, Board of Education and Federal payroll data to verify reported income. According to the Director of Leased Housing, the key to making this kind of effort productive is to get the right items from

each agency's data system into the process and onto the printouts, so that matches are correctly identified and the necessary information is all there.

Data Sources Used to Detect Fraud

Unit Tenancy

- *Utility company records (in whose name is account for program unit?)*
- *Postmaster records of persons receiving mail at program address*
- *Reverse telephone directory*
- *Computerized match against Health Department death records*

Employment Status

- *Dun and Bradstreet ownership data*
- *State Attorney General's Office records of incorporation*

Income Reporting

- *On-line link to welfare office, providing addresses, income amounts for family members receiving AFDC, SSI, Medicaid, or Food Stamps*
- *High-volume computerized matching with City, Board of Education, State, and Federal payroll records*

The new Fraud Unit has 10 staff members, two of whom are supervisors. The recently publicized arrests of more than ten people on charges of income concealment followed investigations based on high-volume computerized matching of city, state, and federal payroll data with Section 8 program participant data.

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SECURITY DEPOSITS: GUARANTEEING RENTAL DEPOSIT PAYMENTS

Anyone who has ever moved to a new apartment understands the problem with providing a security deposit. Renting a unit in the private market usually requires up-front payment of a security deposit, as well as the first and often last month's rent. Coming up with this cash, in addition to moving expenses, utility deposits, and daily living expenses sometimes seems impossible. Following the 1995 changes in Section 8 regulations, landlords are now permitted to set the security deposit Section 8 tenants pay equal to what is typically required in the local market, usually one month's rent.

THE CHALLENGE

For Section 8 families, coming up with an extra month's rent can be overwhelming. With extremely low incomes and little or no savings, they struggle to cover even small extra expenses and can have great difficulty raising the money to pay for moving expenses, their rent payment, utility deposits and security deposits. Housing agencies are looking for ways to help applicants cover these up-front costs, so they can move into their units.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

In **Marin County, California**, needy families can apply for help through the ***Housing Authority of the County of Marin's Rental Deposit Guarantee (RDG) Program***. The housing authority, which manages about 1,800 Section 8 certificates and vouchers, works to persuade landlords to accept the security deposit from the tenant in installments, with no interest. Payment plans typically range from two to six months. If the landlord agrees, the housing authority issues a certificate guaranteeing the payment if the tenant fails to pay. On average, the amount guaranteed per family is about \$500, but RDG Program rules allow as much as \$800. So far the program has been quite successful - the repayment rate has been approximately 90 percent.

The RDG program was set up in the late 1980s to help low-income renters with move-in costs and security deposits. Although earlier RDG program participants typically were not receiving rental assistance, Section 8 recipients were not excluded from the program. Following the 1995 change in Section 8 rules affecting security deposits, applications from Section 8 participants have been increasing. About three-quarters of the 120 families helped this year were Section 8 recipients. To be eligible for the program, a family must be low-income according to HUD definitions (household income at or below 80 percent of the area median) and must also demonstrate the ability to pay the monthly installments. RDG program staff go over a family's budget to help determine whether the family can make the payments after meeting monthly living expenses.

The Marin Community Foundation provided \$50,000 to set up a fund to cover defaults. Thanks to the high repayment rate, about \$37,000 remains in the fund. The foundation also provides about \$30,000 per year to support a half-time staff person and cover administrative costs.

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**MOBILITY:
HELPING PARTICIPANTS EXERCISE NEW HOUSING OPTIONS**

Section 8 allows families to use their assistance to obtain the housing that best suits their needs, within the rent and housing quality requirements set by the program. In many metropolitan areas Section 8 recipients are dispersed throughout the community. However, in some places Section 8 tenants are concentrated in low-income areas where there tend to be fewer jobs, higher crime rates, poor schools, and inadequate city services. The reasons behind this concentration are numerous and complex. Discrimination, higher housing prices, inadequate public transportation and social services, and participants' reluctance to leave familiar surroundings and support networks are all contributing factors. Program administrators and policy makers hope that encouraging participants to explore housing in generally middle-income communities will promote self-sufficiency because of the improved safety and the broader range of economic and educational opportunities these areas offer.

THE CHALLENGE

Many Section 8 participants are totally unfamiliar with sections of the city and suburban neighborhoods they can afford with Section 8 assistance. To compound the problem, owners in those areas are less familiar with Section 8 and may be less willing to accept it. The challenge, then, is to provide Section 8 participants with the help they need to search effectively for housing alternatives in a broad range of areas and to encourage landlords throughout the community to accept Section 8 tenants.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Housing agencies have developed various innovative ways to broaden the range of housing choices for Section 8 participants including:

- Counseling participants about the advantages of lower-poverty areas;
- Providing information resources about better-quality neighborhoods;
- Offering direct assistance in locating apartments;

- Taking participants on tours of unfamiliar neighborhoods;
- Negotiating with landlords and advocating for Section 8 tenants; and
- Setting the program's allowable rents to permit higher rents (including exception rents) in low-poverty neighborhoods, and to limit rents paid in high-poverty areas.

The three agencies profiled here have adopted a range of creative approaches to promote mobility among Section 8 participants.

BROADEN CHOICE THROUGH A PROGRAM OF INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

The City of Hartford, Connecticut contains several high-poverty neighborhoods that are surrounded by a relatively affluent metropolitan area. Areas outside the city often offer better quality housing, a safer environment, better schools, and easier access to employment. Because the metropolitan rental market has been relatively soft, housing in many of these areas has been available and affordable with Section 8 assistance.

The ***Hartford Department of Housing and Community Development*** contracts its regular Section 8 program administration to Imagineers, Inc. Since 1992, Imagineers has, in turn, contracted with the Housing Education Resource Center (HERC) to develop a mobility program. This program provides ***housing counseling on an individual basis*** to households receiving Section 8 assistance. HERC has packets of information available about each of the 29 cities and towns in the Hartford area, including maps and bus schedules. Once participants select areas to search, HERC staff provide them with the information about those areas. Staff take them on individual tours of the selected communities so they can search for housing and view the schools, shopping areas, and transportation routes. Counselors work on identifying units through newspaper listings, signs, and contacts with participating landlords. Depending on the needs of the participant, a counselor may become involved in visiting a specific unit and even negotiating rents and deposits. Recently, HERC staff have begun a more systematic landlord outreach effort, providing information about the Section 8 program to property owners in the targeted areas.

Since June 1992, HERC has placed 140 families in housing in and around Hartford. Of these families, 87 (or 62 percent) have moved to higher-income areas outside the city. Because

the program's purpose is to help families move out of the city, staff do not assist those who choose to remain in Hartford. One example of the program's success is a woman who recently moved from a public housing complex in Hartford to a new development in a semi-rural area. This participant moved further away than most clients and faced many challenges, particularly a lack of good public transportation. Within a month, she called the program staff to tell them she had gotten her driver's license and was applying for a job driving a commuter van pool. She is very happy with her move and feels it has opened up new opportunities for her and her daughter.

The program has been supported entirely through grants from the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving. HERC received its first grant of \$250,000 in 1992 and received a second grant of \$130,000 in 1996.

A THREE-PRONGED APPROACH TO MOBILITY COUNSELING

In addition to local housing agencies, Massachusetts is one of about 35 states around the country that operates a statewide Section 8 program. While some states run the Section 8 certificate and voucher programs through branch offices or local housing agencies, Massachusetts subcontracts with nine organizations throughout the state: eight nonprofits and one regional housing authority. In the Boston metropolitan area, the subcontractor is the ***Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership*** (MBHP). This nonprofit administers Section 8 in 33 cities and towns, including the City of Boston.

The MBHP mobility program is similar to the program in Hartford, but it is larger and more comprehensive. It consists of three parts: ***program representatives; educational sessions; and a Resource Room.***

- Program intake and recertification staff (called ***program representatives***) provide mobility counseling along with eligibility determination, lease-up, and recertification. They encourage families to consider the wider range of housing options available with rental assistance, explaining how Section 8 enables them to afford to live in higher-income neighborhoods. The program representatives discuss these ideas not only when clients are first issued certificates and vouchers, but also each year when their incomes are re-examined. According to staff, participants are often more receptive to undertaking a wider search after they have received rental assistance for a year or more, because they are both more experienced with the program and less anxious about looking for new housing.

- **Educational sessions** for new certificate- and voucher-holders emphasize mobility and neighborhood options. Special mobility briefings are offered to existing participants who want to move to a different area. These briefings include information on how to conduct a housing search, on the materials available in MBHP's Resource Room, and a review of fair housing laws.
- The **Resource Room** is considered the core of MBHP's mobility efforts, serving new and existing participants alike. The room, which is on the main floor of the agency's offices and open to everyone -- contains binders with information on neighborhoods in the City of Boston and all other cities and towns in MBHP's service area. Each binder provides an overview of the location, describing services, schools, rents, transportation, and other features. In addition, the binders include opinions from MBHP clients already living in the community. Resource Room staff help clients use the binders and other materials, such as local newspapers and a computerized data base of apartment listings.

Staff members also conduct search workshops, to help clients with self-presentation, approaching and convincing landlords, and choosing a unit. MBHP is strengthening its mobility focus through the recent addition of a property owner outreach specialist, who will focus on increasing rental listings and maximizing tenants' housing choice by reaching out to property owners in all of the communities within MBHP's service area.

MBHP's Section 8 participants have found homes throughout the Boston metropolitan area and beyond. MBHP does not have data on the characteristics of the neighborhoods and communities clients choose, nor is there information on the kinds of areas they were living in before they leased-up under Section 8. The agency is interested in examining these questions for the future; however, program staff report much anecdotal evidence that suggests participants have expanded their opportunities. For example, staff recently helped a couple move from public housing to a single-family home in a suburban community near the beach. Program staff helped the family learn how to present themselves to the landlord; the landlord "loved them" immediately and even agreed to accept the lower rent required by the Section 8 program. Another recent success was a woman who was a student and came to the agency every day on her break to check for new apartment listings. She has now moved from public housing to a very nice apartment in a close-in suburb. Staff report that they regularly receive calls from these and other participants to thank them for the assistance and tell them how happy they are in their new homes.

In addition to the regular program staff, MBHP has hired two staff who are dedicated to the mobility program: the Resource Room counselor and the new property owner outreach specialist. All costs are covered through the agency's regular administrative funds.

ALLOWING HIGHER RENTS IN LOW-POVERTY NEIGHBORHOODS

Allowable program rent levels are also critical to Section 8 household location choices. Regardless of mobility counseling, participants can only live in areas they can afford within the program's rent limits. The **Orange County (CA) Housing Authority** (OCHA) is one agency that strategically uses rent caps for specific areas as a tool to encourage program participants to expand their housing search into new neighborhoods.

HUD establishes a rent ceiling (Fair Market Rent, or FMR) for the entire metropolitan area. OCHA has established a more detailed rent schedule, allowing rents higher than the FMR (though still within the housing authority's case-by-case exception approval authority) in specific areas where the market rent is above the county average and the housing and neighborhoods are of higher quality. Rents are capped at a level well below the FMR in places where the housing and community features are of lower quality. The rent levels for various parts of Orange County are described in the briefing provided to new Section 8 recipients, and Section 8 staff have prepared a written summary of rents allowed in each of the twenty-nine cities OCHA serves. Because their subsidies are worth more in certain areas, certificate holders have an incentive to expand their housing search into new neighborhoods. Leasing data show that Section 8 recipients in Orange County are well-dispersed throughout the county.

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**RENT REASONABLENESS:
OBTAINING THE DATA NEEDED TO SUPPORT RENT DETERMINATIONS**

Each housing agency (HA) is required to make a determination and certify that every rent approved for its local Section 8 program is reasonable. This means that it does not exceed the rent that would be charged for a comparable unit in a similar location in the private, unassisted market. For the certificate program, the rent also may not exceed the HUD-published Fair Market Rent (FMR) even when the rent asked by the owner accurately reflects the value of the housing. Both housing agencies and HUD may grant some exceptions to the FMR as necessary. For the voucher program, there is no such limit. However, since the voucher program's Payment Standard limits the amount of the subsidy and the tenant pays the difference, the determination of reasonableness is even more important.

The rent reasonableness test is essential to the operation of the Section 8 program for a number of reasons. Simply determining that a rent falls within the FMR for a locality does not guarantee that the rent is reasonable for the unit's specific location, level of amenities, and access to services. Many large urban areas have neighborhoods where rents are significantly below the FMR for the community. Inadequate rent reasonableness determinations can be very costly to the Section 8 program in these areas. Permitting unreasonably high rents may lead to negative consequences beyond limiting the number of families that the program can serve. It may inflate rents in the community because landlords have a strong incentive to maximize rents.

A Section 8 rent that exceeds the rent on comparable units in the community may even cause a landlord to be lax in tenant screening because of the financial rewards for accepting tenants with Section 8 assistance. Landlords might also neglect maintenance if quality is ignored in the rent reasonableness determination.

THE CHALLENGE

HUD provides no clear guidance to housing agencies on how to perform rent reasonableness determinations. To determine that a rent is reasonable, and thus assure the program assists the maximum number of families, an agency needs complete, accurate, and

up-to-date information on the housing stock in its community including: location, size, and type of housing unit; quality of the unit; amenities and facilities; management and maintenance services; and gross rent. Collecting these data can be an expensive and time-consuming proposition for housing agencies, yet it is essential to the efficient and effective operation of a local Section 8 program.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The two housing authorities discussed here have taken different approaches to collecting the data needed to support rent reasonableness determinations. The ***Housing Authority of Portland (OR)*** (HAP) contracts with a major regional broker to conduct its rent survey. ***The Dakota County (MN) Housing and Redevelopment Authority*** (HRA), like many other agencies, conducts rents surveys using in-house staff and expertise. However, HRA uses the survey data to produce a detailed and comprehensive rent report that makes the job of evaluating rents straightforward and easy.

HIRING A REAL ESTATE FIRM TO CONDUCT SURVEYS

To support its rent reasonableness determinations, the Housing Authority of Portland contracts with a large regional real estate brokerage to obtain regular reports on rents in Multnomah County. The firm has business relationships with many local property owners, and it maintains and updates a large data base on multifamily housing in the area. Twice a year the brokerage surveys the managers of approximately 20,000 multifamily units in Multnomah County, achieving a very high response rate of about 90 percent.

Many in the local real estate industry rely on the survey, because it is so comprehensive and provides trends for the past several years. Because the brokerage produces a number of general and customized reports with the data from the rent survey, the cost is spread over a number of clients. To keep up with rapidly rising rents in this booming metropolitan area, the housing authority recently contracted to receive two rent reports per year, instead of the annual report they had been receiving. HAP pays \$850 for each semi-annual report, far less than it would cost to use HAP staff to gather this type of rent information.

The housing authority receives a report on the average rent for each bedroom size in each of six sections of the County, with an additional analysis of each of the 29 zip code areas in the County. Armed with a detailed rent report from a source known and respected by local property owners, HAP staff are well-equipped to enter into negotiations on rents.

MARKET SURVEYS CONDUCTED BY THE AGENCY, AUGMENTED BY MONTHLY FIELD VISITS

The Dakota County (MN) Housing and Redevelopment Authority (HRA) administers about 2,000 Section 8 certificates and vouchers in south suburban Minneapolis-St. Paul. The HRA has implemented an extensive annual market survey to support its rent reasonableness determinations for each of its 12 submarkets. Monthly field visits to local properties supplement this information.

For its annual market survey, the HRA mails surveys to all landlords in the county, using address information from the county assessor's office. Responses are usually received on nearly 20,000 units or about 70 percent of the multifamily stock in the county. The survey asks for numbers and sizes of units, rents, vacancies, security deposit amounts, utilities paid by the tenant, amenities available, and services within a mile of the property. If the landlord does not respond, HRA staff follow-up by phone.

In addition to the survey, HRA staff members make field visits to a different area each month and attempt to see as many properties as possible, including those rented to non-Section 8 tenants. These field visits help build relationships with local landlords and also provide a better basis for making rent reasonableness decisions, because HRA staff, once they have seen the properties in question, are better able to determine whether the properties are truly comparable.

Information on each multifamily development is entered into a computer data base that is used to generate an extensive annual rental housing report, identifying the vacancy rate and average rent by bedroom size, county-wide and for each of the 12 cities in Dakota County. The market study is carried out by four staff members, who complete the project within four months.

Both agencies have been able to use the rent reasonableness data for other Section 8 purposes as well. For Portland, the availability of comprehensive, reliable rent data also provides HAP staff with the information needed to grant case-by-case exception rents, which has been

necessary for about eight percent of the units currently under lease. Dakota County has used its data to request HUD-approved changes for the FMRs in seven cities within the county.

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HOUSING QUALITY STANDARDS (HQS): STREAMLINING THE PROCESS BY COMPUTERIZING INSPECTION DATA

To ensure that recipients have safe and healthy housing, Section 8 program rules require that all units meet Housing Quality Standards (HQS), a set of guidelines describing minimum health and safety requirements. Program administrators inspect all units -- at a minimum -- before the initial lease-up and then each year at recertification to verify compliance with HQS. Historically, the process has been done manually -- using paper assignment forms for inspectors, recording results on special forms, and then transcribing results for communication to residents and landlords. In addition to being error-prone and expensive, the manual process can be time-consuming and create significant delays. These delays can cause participants to lose units to unassisted renters and can cause landlords to defer responding to health and safety deficiencies.

THE CHALLENGE

In addition to accelerating the inspection process, housing agencies also need to ensure that inspections are performed in a consistent, cost-effective manner and that accurate results are transmitted to landlords and tenants in a timely fashion.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Automation at the field inspector level has been the answer to this challenge for many agencies. Some agencies have purchased "off-the-shelf" software to schedule and record inspections. Other agencies such as the two described here have developed software to meet their own specific needs.

Bar Coded Forms

To address a potential backlog of completed inspections before it became a serious problem, the **Syracuse (NY) Housing Authority** (SHA) developed an automated system that uses **bar code technology** to scan information into a hand-held computer. The new system allows staff to schedule, enter, and track inspection information automatically.

Every morning, each SHA inspector receives a list of inspections for the day. By keying in the tenant number, the inspector calls up the name and address and, in the case of a follow-up inspection, a list of the items that require reinspection. Once at the unit, if there is an HQS problem, the inspector uses a hand-held scanner to scan a preprinted set of bar codes that correspond to the location within the unit and the type of problem noted. Inspectors no longer have to key the data into a computer when they return to the office at the end of the day. Instead, the system simply allows staff to upload all information from the hand-held units into the housing authority's minicomputer, which automatically generates letters to the landlord and tenant. Any of the 10 members of the housing authority's intake staff can access the inspection information immediately, so they can inform tenants whether or not the unit passed inspection.

The system has just recently been implemented, but preliminary tests indicate it will increase the number of inspections each inspector can carry out in a day by 20-25 percent and reduce transcription errors at the same time. Added benefits will include the ability to easily determine the length of different types of inspections (so that planning and scheduling can be made more efficient) and the ability to compare outcomes across inspectors so that consistency can be improved.

The SHA staff had a system specifically developed for their needs because they were convinced that no off-the-shelf software would interface well with their minicomputer system. The total cost was about \$15,000, including the software and four hand-held computers.

Pen-based Mobile Computers

The State of New Jersey Department of Community Affairs (which runs New Jersey's state Section 8 program) is also using automated inspection technology. Field inspectors use ***pen-based mobile computers*** that weigh only four pounds each and eliminate most of the need for writing. Inspectors make entries by tapping the "pen" on a menu item or precoded response. If they do need to write something, they call up a keyboard from the computer menu.

Each mobile computer is loaded (via disk) with the inspector's assignments, the inspection form, and the entire HQS manual from HUD. The information contains a list of all the inspections that need to be completed, with the full tenant and unit information already in the

system. A software program puts all relevant information into the inspection form and prompts the inspection room-by-room and item-by-item. To check what the handbook or regulations say about a particular item, the inspector taps a button next to that item and the relevant text appears on the screen.

At the end of each day, the inspector returns to the office, and the mobile computer produces:

- an inspection report for the landlord;
- a results letter for the landlord;
- a results letter for the tenant; and
- an inspection report copy for the file.

With this information complete, all paperwork from the inspection can be mailed the same day.

A nine-month demonstration of this system was completed in January 1996, and the system is now being installed in all 18 field offices the agency operates across the state.

Demonstration results indicate that:

- Inspectors like the system and are able to handle it, even if they have no prior computer experience.
- Inspectors can train their peers to use it.
- The number of inspections completed per day by the inspection staff in one of the test sites has doubled.
- Clerical support requirements have been reduced.

The savings that resulted from automation are being used to support the agency's Family Self-Sufficiency Program.

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**PORTABILITY:
MAKING IT EASIER FOR TENANTS AND AGENCIES**

The Section 8 program is administered by over 2,500 state and local housing agencies. This decentralized organizational structure gives local programs flexibility to take account of local housing conditions, costs, and practices. At the same time, program rules now allow participants to use their Section 8 assistance anywhere in the country where there is a housing agency administering the program. In order to accommodate such moves, HUD has established portability mechanisms for transferring administrative responsibility and funding across jurisdictional boundaries.

Accommodating portability poses an administrative challenge wherever there are several Section 8 agencies in the same metropolitan area and inter-jurisdictional moves are common. If many recipients move between jurisdictions, it can be very inefficient to transfer recipient files among agencies and create new records that conform to each agency's particular practices. HUD portability guidelines call for the agency administering Section 8 in the new location (the "receiving agency") to bill the housing agency initially issuing the certificate or voucher (the "initiating agency") for the housing assistance payment (HAP) and for 80 percent of the administrative fee associated with the unit. Although HUD recently simplified the process by establishing standard billing procedures nationwide, the process still requires extra record keeping and correspondence, and the receiving agency must depend on the initiating agency to pay its bills promptly if the receiving agency does not elect to absorb the recipient family into its Section 8 program.

Some receiving agencies have addressed these moves by "absorbing" the new household. The receiving agency replaces the certificate or voucher issued by the initiating agency with one funded from its own allocation, freeing up a slot on the initiating agency's waiting list. Absorption saves both agencies the effort and administrative problems associated with billing. However, the receiving agency must use funds that could have been used to provide assistance to someone on its own waiting list.

Some agencies have responded to the problems associated with transferring Section 8 cases between neighboring housing agencies by adopting cooperative agreements among several agencies, allowing each one to continue to administer its own cases when families move between jurisdictions. However, this also has its drawbacks. While it is efficient for housing agencies to maintain responsibility for recipients who move to a nearby jurisdiction, it can be confusing to have local property owners and managers deal with more than one housing agency.

THE CHALLENGE

Regardless of the approach agencies take to handling moves across jurisdictions, accommodating portability can be costly and administratively complicated. The main challenge program operators face is developing procedures that minimize costs and simplify the process for both initiating and receiving agencies, without increasing the confusion or burden faced by Section 8 recipients or landlords.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

To address these problems, some agencies have established agreements under which they ***share responsibility for inter-jurisdictional moves***: the initiating agency continues to work with the recipient family, while the agency in the new location performs key functions related to owners and managers, especially rent reasonableness determinations and Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspections. Two such arrangements are in place in **Las Vegas, Nevada and Orange County, California**.

The Las Vegas metropolitan area (Clark County) is large and growing rapidly. Many local residents are newcomers, neighborhoods are not clearly defined, and new housing is being added steadily. As a result, Section 8 recipients tend to move frequently, and the resulting paperwork creates an administrative burden for the three housing authorities that operate Section 8 programs in the area.

In 1991, the ***Housing Authority of Clark County, the Housing Authority of Las Vegas, and the Housing Authority of the City of North Las Vegas*** signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) that allows the initiating housing authority (HA) to continue administering

a Section 8 certificate or voucher even when a household moves out of the HA's jurisdiction. The agreement grew out of regular discussions among the housing authority directors. The three HAs all had similar leasing and inspection procedures for Section 8, so it was not a problem to have landlords occasionally deal with different HAs. However, because a rent reasonableness determination requires detailed knowledge about the local market condition in the area, the HA responsible for the jurisdiction where the unit is located conducts the rent reasonableness determination.

As a result of the agreement, each HA now administers units throughout Clark County. For example, when a Section 8 household wants to move from Las Vegas to Henderson, another city in Clark County, the Housing Authority of Las Vegas simply faxes the Request for Lease Approval to the Housing Authority of Clark County (HACC). A staff person from HACC does the rent reasonableness assessment and faxes the form back to the Housing Authority of Las Vegas. Staff from the Housing Authority of Las Vegas complete the rest of the process. They review the Request for Lease Approval, conduct the initial HQS inspection and all necessary reinspections, develop a Section 8 contract with the owner, and make monthly housing assistance payments.

The agreement has allowed the HAs to administer units in neighboring jurisdictions with the same resources and almost identical procedures to those used for units administered within their own jurisdictions.

Likewise, the four housing authorities in **Orange County, California** found that half the portability they experienced took place among HAs within the County. With the support of the local HUD Field Office, the HAs developed an MOU, modeled after the arrangement in the Las Vegas area. The agreement established a "mobility program" that allows each housing authority to continue administering a Section 8 certificate or voucher even when a household moves out of the initial HA's jurisdiction. In this case, however, the HA where the unit is located is responsible for both the rent reasonableness determination and the housing inspection.

When a household with Section 8 assistance moves to a neighboring jurisdiction, the initiating HA pays a fixed fee to have the receiving HA make a rent reasonableness determination and do the necessary HQS inspections. The HAs developed a mobility form that is used to request

an inspection and rent determination on a particular unit. Each HA maintains a log of requests made by the others for tracking and billing purposes.

The largest of the HAs involved, the ***Orange County Housing Authority***, has assigned one full-time staff person to manage the mobility caseload. Orange County processes about 400 households a year from neighboring HAs, while sending mobility forms on 90 households to the other HAs.

Representatives of the four HAs meet monthly on the mobility program, mostly to review specific cases. However, the regular meetings have also provided a forum for discussions about implementing rule changes and reducing disparities between the HAs in policies and procedures. Every year, the participating HAs also swap equal numbers of mobility cases. By transferring equal numbers of cases, the HAs have developed a mechanism to further simplify and reduce the cost of administering units outside of each HA's normal jurisdiction without changing the total number of units each HA has under lease.

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LANDLORD RELATIONS: ENSURING AN ONGOING SUPPLY OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Good businesspeople understand the importance of good suppliers and work hard to maintain positive relationships. Some companies even celebrate "Vendor Appreciation Days." For Section 8 housing agencies, who constantly need to replenish the supply of housing units to accommodate tenant needs, landlords are the suppliers. In order to ensure an ongoing supply of affordable housing, program operators must not only maintain good relationships with existing landlords but also continually attract new ones to the program.

THE CHALLENGE

Maintaining good relations with existing landlords is an ongoing process that involves acknowledging their value and responding to their needs. Attracting new landlords often means educating owners who are unfamiliar with Section 8 and addressing negative impressions they may have about the program's paperwork, allowed rents, timeliness of payments, or tenant housekeeping. Countering these obstacles and making the program appealing to owners is particularly important in tight rental markets where landlords can easily fill their units with unassisted tenants.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Housing agencies have developed a variety of successful strategies to attract and maintain good relations with landlords. Below, we describe the innovative approaches of six different housing agencies (HAs). These agencies have:

- ***Created partnerships with local rental owners and property manager associations*** to reach out to landlords. HA staff often speak at association meetings.
- Designed programs to ***educate landlords*** about the Section 8 program on specific topics such as changes in the Section 8 regulations. As part of the education process, some have instituted owner newsletters which they distribute with rent payments.

- Developed a ***business-like approach*** that recognizes property owners as an important constituency. This approach includes developing professional-looking, easy-to-use forms, responding promptly to questions and concerns, and taking the time to become familiar with all properties that accept Section 8.
- Formed ***landlord advisory committees*** to ensure that the program addresses landlord concerns.
- Established ***special units*** to handle complaints and complex problems.
- Developed ***special services*** to accommodate landlord needs, including responding in-person to concerns in order to develop better relationships, regularly visiting local properties in order to address problems to avoid HQS issues, and offering conveniences such as ***direct deposit for housing assistance payments***.

LANDLORD PARTNERSHIPS AND LANDLORD EDUCATION

Bremerton, Washington is located across the Puget Sound from Seattle. ***The Housing Authority of the City of Bremerton (WA)*** (BHA) had been finding it difficult to convince landlords to participate in the Section 8 program in Bremerton and was struggling to stay fully leased.

The BHA's solution was “Operation Outreach,” an aggressive effort that focuses on educating and forming partnerships with local landlords. In addition to establishing relationships with the Puget Rental Owners Association and the local property managers' association, BHA also concentrates on improving relationships with participating landlords.

The BHA is both proactive and responsive. Among the services it offers are:

- Quarterly seminars on topics such as property management and reducing tenant damages;
- An owner newsletter that focuses on issues ranging from what inspectors look for during HQS inspections to updates about the impact of legislative changes;
- A direct deposit program for payments; and

- A landlord advisory committee that helps inform the agency about landlord concerns.

As a result, BHA's Section 8 program is 100 percent leased, and BHA staff believe that Section 8 tenants in Bremerton now have a broader range of housing choices in better neighborhoods.

A BUSINESS-LIKE APPROACH

In **Boulder, Colorado**, a university town with a vacancy rate generally less than one percent, the ***Housing Authority of the City of Boulder*** (BHA) adopted a professional, business-like approach to attract new landlords and improve relations with current landlords. The housing authority now has professional-looking, easy-to-use forms, and staff members conduct informal visits to all properties where Section 8 recipients live so they can identify problems before they become HQS issues. In addition to responding immediately to landlord concerns, they make in-person visits to discuss issues and provide help with problem tenants. For example, there was an incident where a tenant committed a serious crime in a unit. The next day, the Section 8 staff sent the landlord a plant with a note offering to help in any way they could. According to the program director, this follow-up “won them a landlord for life.”

To attract new landlords, BHA staff make presentations to the local apartment managers association and the Board of Realtors, emphasizing positive facts such as Section 8's annual \$1 million contribution to the local economy.

Results have been excellent. The housing authority and the Section 8 program now enjoy a better reputation and, despite the tight rental market, the program is close to 100 percent leased. The agency's outreach efforts are funded through its administrative funds.

LANDLORD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Portland, Oregon's tremendous economic growth has put considerable pressure on the rental housing market. Rents have been climbing and available units are scarce. Because of this tight housing market, landlords have felt no financial need to accept Section 8 tenants, and certificate and voucher holders had been having difficulty finding qualifying units they can afford.

To encourage landlord participation, *The Housing Authority of Portland* (HAP) has focused on becoming more service-oriented. Like its Boulder counterpart, the HAP has tried to become a “good business partner,” identifying areas of concern to landlords, eliminating obstacles, and promoting the image of the agency and the program. And like Bremerton, it relies on a Landlord Advisory Committee as a critical element of its strategy.

The 12-member Landlord Advisory Committee represents the full range of Section 8 landlords from professional management firms to nonprofit community development corporations. The committee meets monthly with representatives of the Section 8 program's eligibility, inspection, and communications teams. The committee has been very successful in playing a dual role, presenting owners' concerns to the housing authority and marketing the program to encourage new owners to participate. It has helped the HA on a range of issues, such as identifying the need for an owner newsletter to provide earlier notification of impending program changes and making the paperwork more "user-friendly." For example, in response to feedback from the Landlord Advisory Committee, the HA eased the documentation required to support damage claims of small amounts. The program is now nearly 100 percent leased.

PROBLEM-HANDLING UNITS

Ombudsperson Unit

A number of years ago, the *Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles* (CA) (HACLA) began a reorganization and automation process. The director of the Section 8 program realized that while the reorganization and automation would ultimately improve efficiency, the process itself might create more delays. He decided that the program would need a “trouble shooter,” an ombudsperson who could handle complaints from owners, tenants, and applicants who were not satisfied with the help they received from the regular Section 8 staff. The service was successful, and when the two-year reorganization was complete, HACLA decided to continue it permanently.

Initially, HACLA did not advertise the service, but staff referred callers to the ombudsperson when they encountered either problems they could not handle easily or dissatisfied landlords, tenants, or applicants. HACLA now provides the unit's phone number to landlords in

its newsletter and also gives it to social service agencies. Tenants and applicants generally are referred to the ombudsperson when they call the Section 8 Director's or Executive Director's offices with complaints.

Having the ombudsperson service has helped HACLA's very large Section 8 program of approximately 40,000 certificates and vouchers to function more smoothly. For example, after the Northridge earthquake in 1994, HACLA used the unit to handle the tremendous volume of questions and concerns from the 10,000 families who received special emergency certificates. The service allows program staff to hand-off the more complex or difficult problems, leaving more time for them to attend to their regular responsibilities. Social service providers who work with the housing authority on FSS and other programs use the unit as their main contact points, as do local politicians.

Because the unit can provide feedback from tenants and landlords about the service they received, HACLA also relies on it to help with total quality service training. Further, because of the types of questions and issues that have arisen from landlords, the original ombudsperson developed and implemented a program to educate landlords about the Section 8 program. Since the 1994 earthquake, there have been four senior-level staff working in this unit. The unit will be scaled back somewhat in the near future, but HACLA is committed to maintaining it because of the very positive role it has played over the last few years.

Complaint Unit

Following Hurricane Andrew, the Section 8 program in **Dade County, Florida** doubled in size to about 9,000 certificates and vouchers. The ***Metro Dade Housing Agency*** received 4,300 emergency vouchers and encountered many new tenants and landlords who had no previous experience with Section 8. The agency therefore decided to create a special unit as the point of contact for all questions and complaints from tenants, landlords, and the public. If the complaint unit staff cannot solve a problem, they refer the caller to a line-staff person. The unit consists of a supervisor and four staff members, two of whom are fluent in Spanish. The agency used its owner newsletter, local newspapers, and resident mailings to advertise the unit.

Having a designated staff to handle problems and complaints has helped the agency help its clients through a difficult time. Now that the post-hurricane rush is over, the agency is receiving fewer calls with questions and complaints. Complaint unit staff are turning towards other tasks within the agency, such as developing a new landlord outreach program.

DIRECT DEPOSIT SERVICE

Until about two years ago, the *Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency of Nashville* (TN) mailed monthly housing assistance payment (HAP) checks to landlords. Delayed or lost checks were both annoying to landlords and expensive for the agency, which had to divert staff to answer calls, track missing checks, verify signatures, and, finally, issue replacement checks. To address this problem, agency staff set up a Direct Deposit system so that HAP checks could be deposited directly into landlords' bank accounts. To market the new service, they met first with some of the larger landlords and sent out a mailing to all program landlords explaining the benefits of direct deposit. They especially targeted landlords who had often complained about late checks. As they expected, once the large landlords decided to participate, many others followed suit.

Nearly three-quarters of the program's landlords now take advantage of direct deposit and have been very satisfied with the results. They receive payments reliably on the first of the month; they also receive statements prior to the deposit, so they know the exact amount. Other important benefits include less landlord/tenant tension over missing payments as well as increased staff time for other activities. Setting up and running the direct deposit program is almost costless for the agency. The bank set up the payment program to owners as part of its normal business practice.

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COMMUNITY RELATIONS: BUILDING A POSITIVE IMAGE FOR SECTION 8 RENTERS

The successful integration of Section 8 renters into a community requires the support of landlords, local homeowners, and other renters. Building and maintaining good community relations is one of the hardest jobs for any Section 8 administrator. Community perceptions and needs are subjective and are constantly changing. Sometimes program administrators must overcome negative stereotypes about bad tenants; other times they must sort out already-strained relationships between homeowners and renters. At all times they must build and maintain positive impressions about the Section 8 program.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge for Section 8 program operators is to understand and appreciate community concerns so they can develop a program that operates well, is attractive to eligible families and landlords, and has a positive reputation in the community. They must determine whether problems attributed to Section 8 participants are real, or if they are due to other neighborhood residents. Housing agencies need to work to solve problems where they exist and to be proactive to educate the community so that Section 8 renters are not blamed for problems caused by other residents.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICE

The ***Fort Wayne (IN) Housing Authority*** saw an image problem that was affecting Section 8 renters. They dealt with this problem in an innovative way, by working with city officials to develop a video on renters' rights and responsibilities.

Neighborhood associations in the city of Fort Wayne were complaining to the Fort Wayne Housing Authority about Section 8 participants. The neighborhood associations claimed that Section 8 renters were responsible for health, safety, and building code violations in their neighborhoods. When housing authority staff investigated the allegations, they found that the complaints were often about renters who were not Section 8 recipients. These complaints, in fact,

reflected a history of strained relationships between the homeowners and renters in these neighborhoods stemming from a wave of investors purchasing and converting homes to rental properties.

To address this problem, the housing authority and the city joined forces to produce a video on renters' rights and responsibilities. Intended to allay homeowners' fears, stereotypes, and beliefs about renters and to teach landlords and tenants about their rights and responsibilities, the video explains how the concerns of all parties are interrelated. It is the first public information program in the Fort Wayne metropolitan area to address landlord-tenant relations.

As full partners in the production of the video, staff from the housing authority and the city based the script on interviews with homeowners and with Section 8 and non-Section 8 tenants and landlords. They found that the rights and responsibilities of tenants, landlords, and homeowners were interrelated and complementary. Tenants felt they had the right to live anywhere they could afford and had a right to clean, safe units. Landlords knew it was their responsibility to adhere to fair housing laws and maintain their rental properties and felt they had the right to be paid on time and to have their units kept free from abuse and damage. Tenants knew it was their responsibility to pay the rent on time and to keep up their units. The video shows that renters, landlords, and neighborhood homeowners are all responsible for maintaining the properties and the neighborhood.

A local TV news personality narrated the film, which features interviews with local owners and renters from both the assisted and unassisted sectors. The video includes an interview with a Section 8 tenant whose goals for finding housing match those of any homeowner or renter. She wants a clean unit in a quiet neighborhood with courteous neighbors who will look out for each other, their children, and their homes.

In addition to addressing the immediate problem of homeowner complaints about Section 8 recipients, the video was created as an educational tool to promote good relations among all renters, homeowners, landlords, and neighborhood organizations. It is shown at Section 8 orientations, and the city has screened it at virtually all neighborhood association meetings. A number of local tenant organizations have also presented the video at their meetings, and social service agencies use it in some of their programs as well.

The total direct cost of producing the video was \$12,000. The housing authority paid half and the city paid the other half from its Community Development Block Grant funds.

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From “Renters Rights and Responsibilities” video
produced by the Housing Authority of Fort Wayne, Indiana, and the City of Fort Wayne

How to be a good renter and responsible neighbor



Pay rent and utility bills on time.



Notify landlord of any damages or broken appliances.



Know expectations outlined in the lease.



Keep home neat and clean.



Remember to put out garbage on assigned days. Check into recycling service.



Be considerate of your neighbors, don't play loud music.



Make sure guests are respectful of your neighbors and their property.



Keep yard free of waste and debris... remember to mow and rake the grass and shovel the snow.



Don't park in the yard or on the sidewalk. Know the rules for street parking.



Keep kids and pets out of neighbors' yards and the street.



Consider purchasing renters' insurance.



Get involved in your neighborhood association.



Report criminal activity.



Know emergency phone numbers, including your landlord's.

Things to do if you find something wrong with your unit...



Talk with your landlord first.



Call Neighborhood Code Enforcement, which may cite your landlord for code violations and require him or her to make repairs.



Use common ground mediation through the City of Ft. Wayne... they provide you with an objective person who will decide how the disagreement should be solved.



If you receive Section 8 assistance through the Ft. Wayne Housing Authority, they can stop paying rent until repairs are made.

TENANTS AND CRIME: PROMOTING SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS

Drugs and drug-related crimes are growing problems in many communities. Unfortunately, low-income families, including some Section 8 recipients, are especially likely to live in areas where drug-related crimes occur more frequently. Terminating housing assistance to Section 8 participants who are found to be engaged in drug-related crimes or serious lease violations and adopting other creative crime prevention and response strategies are essential, both to guarantee safe housing for Section 8 renters and to protect them from "guilt by association" when criminal activity occurs in their neighborhoods.

THE CHALLENGE

Initiating effective crime prevention and response programs is a special challenge for Section 8 program administrators, because the units are typically scattered throughout the community. One consequence is that program participants are often blamed for crimes for which they are not responsible. Program administrators need to determine whether Section 8 participants are, in fact, contributing to criminal patterns in their neighborhoods. Whatever that determination shows, local housing agencies need to address the **perception** as well as the reality, if that is the case, that Section 8 participants contribute to neighborhood crime.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The housing authorities highlighted here have adopted different types of successful strategies: two have formed partnerships with local police departments and one has implemented a community-based crime prevention program.

PARTNERSHIPS WITH POLICE

Oakland's Early Alert on Crime

Oakland's 8,000 Section 8 certificate and voucher holders are widely dispersed throughout the community. To prevent criminal activity in housing units occupied by Section 8 recipients from damaging the reputation of the program and the many law-abiding families who benefit from it, the ***Oakland (CA) Housing Authority (OHA)*** works with the Oakland Police Department (OPD) using a two-pronged strategy:

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The Early Alert on Crime Program. The OHA works collaboratively with the police department to identify assisted families who may be engaged in criminal activities. An officer from the housing authority's Security Services Department (whose officers are trained by the Oakland Police Department) reviews the city's drug arrest logs daily at the OPD offices to identify arrests made in units leased to Section 8 recipients. If, after investigating and verifying the facts, it appears that a Section 8 tenant has committed a criminal offense, the housing authority moves to terminate housing assistance.

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Landlord Education. The OHA's partnership with the Oakland Police Department has also led to an initiative to educate landlords about their responsibility for controlling crime on their properties. The OPD has developed a training program for owners, agents, and property managers on preventing illegal activities in rental properties. This program is available free of charge to the landlords participating in the OHA's Section 8 program. To date, approximately 400 landlords who rent units to Section 8 recipients have attended these sessions.

Using these strategies, the Oakland Housing Authority takes a proactive approach to dealing with Section 8 tenants involved in or threatened by illegal activity. The Section 8 program staff used to be the last to know when there was a problem; now staff are able to deal with problems in a timely and effective fashion.

The OHA's two-part crime prevention program has not required additional resources, because it has built on existing activities funded by a HUD Public Housing Drug Elimination Program (PHDEP) grant, extending those activities from public housing to the Section 8 program.

Alameda County's SMASH Program

The ***Housing Authority of Alameda County (CA)*** (HAAC), which administers nearly 5,000 Section 8 certificates and vouchers, also decided the best solution to both its crime and image problems was a partnership with the local police.

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The housing authority created the ***Specialized Multi-Agency Safe Housing (SMASH) program***, in conjunction with the Hayward Police Department and the HUD Office of the Inspector General (OIG). The police department selects troubled neighborhoods to target for the SMASH program. When the police identify a particular address as a location where criminal activity is taking place, HAAC staff search their databases to see if any Section 8 participants live at that address so that police can be as specific as possible in search warrant requests for targeted properties. The police, in turn, provide evidence to support the housing authority's efforts to terminate the housing assistance of tenants who have committed crimes or are defrauding the Section 8 program or other social service agencies. Investigators from the HUD Office of the Inspector General play an active role in the SMASH operations and act as the program's liaison with federal agencies such as the Secret Service and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms.

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The housing authority established a new position, ***Program Integrity Administrator*** (PIA), and hired a former police officer to fill the job. The PIA uses information from the SMASH operations to identify Section 8 recipients who have committed a crime or fraud, or violated program rules, so that assistance can be terminated. He also coordinates the housing authority's work with the police and other investigative agencies and educates police on ways the housing authority and police can work together to prevent the recurrence of criminal activities in targeted properties. For example, he asks police officers to attend hearings to support the housing authority's efforts to terminate the assistance of participants who violate program rules.

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Alameda's police partnership program is also directed at overcoming Section 8's image problem and community perceptions about the extent to which Section 8 participants are responsible for crime. An aggressive public speaking campaign is designed to educate the community about the program. The housing authority's executive director frequently speaks at public forums and meets with local police. These presentations have allowed her to directly address rumors about Section 8 tenants causing problems in specific buildings or neighborhoods.

Results have been very impressive. The housing authority has terminated assistance for tenants involved in criminal activity, unauthorized people have been "kicked-out" of units rented by Section 8 recipients. SMASH operations have helped residents "take back" five apartment

complexes where many Section 8 recipients live, and overall community support for the program has been very strong.

The housing authority has now launched seven major SMASH operations, with a new program in place in Union City and one being planned in Fremont. The housing authority's participation in SMASH and the other activities of the Program Integrity Administrator are funded as part of its regular Section 8 administrative budget.

COMMUNITY CRIME PREVENTION INITIATIVES

When the ***Richmond (VA) Redevelopment and Housing Authority (RRHA)*** experienced serious problems with crime and drug trafficking in several private properties with large numbers of Section 8 recipients, it targeted these properties for a community crime prevention initiative. Modeled after the RRHA's Gilpin Safe Neighborhood Initiative and Safe Neighborhood Action Program (SNAP) programs, the new initiative involves organizing tenants to address problems in their developments and to create links among tenants, police, local businesses, and social service agencies.

VISTA volunteers work with residents in selected properties to develop leadership capacity, build community stability, and increase resident involvement in crime prevention activities focused on substance abuse and drugs. Before beginning work in targeted developments, the volunteer organizers meet with the property owners to tell them about the program and get their consent. The volunteers then begin to help tenants to organize resident councils, start tenant-run programs and activities, and tap into community resources. For example, residents solicit nearby businesses for donations to support youth activities and work with the local police department to gain a more visible police presence in their developments.

Although they don't have hard crime statistics to prove it, RRHA staff believe the program has reduced crime in the targeted locations and has helped strengthen the communities. They cite instances of residents being more aware of criminal activities in their neighborhoods and cooperating with police. Some of the program's other achievements include helping tenants form a resident council, organize holiday parties, sponsor activities for children, and in one development, organize and staff a summer camp program for youth. Likewise, in another

community, the volunteer has been instrumental in setting up an after-school tutoring program, a foodbank, a resident association, and a women's support group, as well as a number of other activities that offer alternatives to crime and drugs.

This innovative crime prevention program is being conducted at very little cost to the RRHA. The seven VISTA volunteers are entirely subsidized by Americorps/VISTA. The only cost to the housing authority is for staff time to train and work with the volunteers.

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**FAMILY SELF-SUFFICIENCY:
COORDINATING ASSISTANCE TO PROMOTE ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE**

While it may be true that "welfare can become a way of life," most recipients of public assistance long for economic independence and self-sufficiency. To help them, HUD implemented the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program in 1991. The housing agency's (HA) role in the program is to administer the rental assistance and to facilitate client access to existing education, job training, and supportive services (such as transportation, child care, personal and career counseling). This is achieved through coordination with local service providers such as Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) agencies and welfare offices. Up to half of all FSS slots may be reserved for families already enrolled in welfare-to-work programs sponsored by these other agencies.

Although the program is voluntary for families receiving Section 8 assistance, participating families must enter a five-year contract with the housing agency. In addition to using available services, FSS participants also have the opportunity to save money. Increases in tenant contributions to rent that would otherwise result from increases in tenants' earned income are deposited into interest-bearing escrow accounts, which the tenants can access once they complete their contract obligations and stop receiving welfare. They can also access the funds for other specific purposes related to their self-sufficiency efforts while they are still working on their FSS contracts.

THE CHALLENGE

The FSS program model assumes that existing local service providers will supply most of the services. Section 8 administrative fees can be used for service coordination but not for FSS services. While some larger HAs may have sufficient economies of scale in administration of their Section 8 programs to provide case management without seeking additional resources, there often are not sufficient funds to provide as much case management as families need. The key challenges for a successful FSS program are finding appropriate case management support and developing

on-going links with service providers, so that families in the FSS program can indeed progress towards self-sufficiency.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

Creating Alternative Organizational Structures

While HUD established general guidelines for FSS program structure and services, each housing agency has substantial discretion to tailor its program design to local circumstances. Some housing agencies have established FSS programs within their own agencies, while others have developed alternative structures for coordinating the program.

For example:

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In **San Diego, California** staff from the ***San Diego Housing Commission's*** Resident Services Department operate a large FSS program (450 participants) with staff funded by the HA's budget. The FSS staff write collaborative grants with universities and other public and private organizations to target innovative services and programs to FSS families. The FSS coordinator provides administrative oversight, while four senior coordinators provide case management to participating families. Each senior coordinator has an area of expertise such as nontraditional occupations for women, microbusiness development, and job training.

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In **Rockford, Illinois**, responsibility for the FSS program is shared by two agencies. The first of the program's three phases, known as Family Magic, is coordinated by two full-time staff in the ***Rockford Housing Authority's*** Family Services Department. The second and third phases, known as Project Self-Sufficiency and Preparation for Home ownership, are coordinated by one full-time staff member at the City of Rockford Human Services Department (a community action agency). Participating families (including 175 public housing and Section 8 families) may enter the program at the phase most appropriate for their needs.

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In **Clearwater, Florida**, an independent nonprofit organization known as ***Partners in Self-Sufficiency*** (PSS) was established in 1988 specifically to operate self-sufficiency programs for the ***Clearwater Housing Authority's*** Section 8 recipients. A key advantage of PSS's nonprofit status is the ability to do fund-raising. PSS's funding sources include private businesses and community groups (such as the Junior League) as well as county Community Development Block Grant funds. Currently, 78 families are enrolled in the PSS program.

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In **Milwaukee, Wisconsin**, a cooperative agreement was established between the YWCA and the

three agencies that administer rental assistance for the Cities of Milwaukee and West Allis and the County of Milwaukee. The housing agencies all contribute funding for one full-time and one half-time case manager employed by the YWCA to work with the approximately 325 FSS families. Each agency also provides one housing specialist to coordinate administration of housing certificates and escrow accounts. Milwaukee's Planning Council for Health and Human Services developed the cooperative agreement, monitors the program, and provides reports on enrollment, participant characteristics, and other topics to the participating agencies.

Maximizing Case Management Capacity

Several agencies have developed innovative ways to provide the one-on-one support that families often need:

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In **Montgomery County, Maryland**, 50 **volunteer case managers** have been recruited from the community and trained to work with about 10 percent of the ***Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) of Montgomery County's*** 441 FSS families. Each volunteer is matched with a family and serves in the same capacity as a professional case manager -- conducting a needs assessment, setting short- and long-term goals, developing an FSS contract, and working with the family to implement the plan. Volunteers are recruited through fliers, media announcements, and presentations at civic organizations. A grant-funded coordinator provides training and support to the volunteers.

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The ***Ithaca (NY) Housing Authority's*** FSS coordinator typically has six **student interns** working in her office. The interns help with special projects and office tasks so the coordinator has more time for one-on-one work with the 66 families enrolled in FSS.

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The ***New Jersey Department of Community Affairs*** (NJDCA) operates an FSS program for approximately 700 families through its statewide network of county housing agencies. Rather than hiring an FSS coordinator for each county, state staff offered current Section 8 field representatives the option of reducing their administrative caseload and receiving additional training to handle case management for FSS families.¹

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The staff of the ***Rockford (IL) Housing Authority*** emphasize that **peer networks** supplement the

¹ *Because of economies the agency was able to achieve by automating their Housing Quality Standard (HQS) inspection process (see p. 38), existing staff were able to absorb the additional administrative case-load.*

individual case management and support provided by program staff. FSS families are encouraged to participate in any or all of three discussion groups that meet on a weekly basis to discuss topics such as career-planning, goal-setting, and home ownership. In addition to gaining valuable information, participants also have an opportunity to build relationships and share experiences with others in similar circumstances.

Developing an Effective Coordinating Committee

HUD guidelines require that each FSS program have a Coordinating Committee representing program stakeholders -- supportive service providers, elected officials, businesspeople, and program participants. The Coordinating Committee's role is to provide oversight for local programs and help identify resources for program participants. Here is one particularly effective model:

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Clearwater, Florida's **Partners in Self-Sufficiency program**, is operated by an independent nonprofit organization (as described above.) PSS has a two-tiered Coordinating Committee. Its Management Advisory Committee, comprised of senior-level staff from key service providers, meets monthly to discuss service needs, plan events, and exchange information and ideas. Its Board of Directors, comprised of Clearwater's mayor and representatives from several large businesses, meets quarterly, helps with fund-raising, and generally serves as PSS "boosters" in the business community. The combined efforts of the Management Advisory Committee and the Board of Directors have helped attract private funding, volunteers, and public attention to the PSS program.

Links to Other Programs

Some agencies have established links between FSS and other initiatives. For example:

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In **Ithaca, New York**, one staff person serves as coordinator for both FSS and the Family Unification Program (FUP).² Roughly half of the 22 FUP families are enrolled in FSS. Through FUP, one single parent was able to move her family out of severely dilapidated housing and into a nice apartment. Once settled in her new housing and with the help of the FSS coordinator, she quickly found work in her field of child care and currently has the highest escrow balance of all of Ithaca's FSS participants.

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In eight **New Jersey** counties, participants in the NJDCA FSS program (described above) are recruited primarily from previously homeless families completing one-year transitional housing

² For more information on the Family Unification Program, see p. 64.

programs. Successful "graduates" of the transitional housing programs receive a preference for available Section 8 certificates, and once in the Section 8 program, move directly into FSS. One success story from New Jersey's program is of a 35-year-old mother of two daughters. Within one year of signing her FSS contract of participation, she completed an Associates' degree in engineering and was hired by the county engineering department. Using her escrow savings, she recently purchased a home.

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**FAMILY UNIFICATION PROGRAM:
COMBINING RENTAL ASSISTANCE WITH OTHER SUPPORTIVE SERVICES
TO KEEP PARENTS AND CHILDREN TOGETHER**

Imagine the trauma of losing your children to foster care because you cannot afford adequate housing. This is a very real fear for some families. The Family Unification Program (FUP) was developed to help families in this situation. The program provides Section 8 rental assistance to families who are eligible for Section 8 and whose children are either at risk of being placed in foster care or are already in foster care because the families lack adequate housing. Families eligible for FUP are often in desperate situations when they are referred to the program. One single mother was living in such a dilapidated house that she stayed awake at night, standing guard over her sleeping son with a baseball bat to keep the rats away from him. She risked charges of neglect if she did not find suitable housing. In another family, all four children had been placed in foster care because of an abusive father. After leaving her husband, the mother could no longer afford adequate housing for herself and her children. She could not regain custody without housing assistance.

The program is run as a partnership between local housing agencies and child welfare agencies. In the four years since its inception, the Family Unification Program (FUP) has provided Section 8 rental assistance to more than 6,000 families, allowing them to move into safe and secure housing and preventing the unnecessary separation of children from their families. Child welfare agency caseworkers help families retain or regain custody of their children and provide other supportive services as needed.

THE CHALLENGE

The successful implementation of the Family Unification Program depends on ***close collaboration between PHAs and child welfare agencies*** to identify eligible families, assist them in the application process (if they are not already on the waiting list), and provide follow-up once they have housing.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The success stories described here all point to the value of collaboration and communication. Co-location of housing and child welfare services can help. For example, the ***Southern Middlesex (MA) Opportunity Council***, which administers the Section 8 program under contract to the Commonwealth's ***Division of Housing and Community Development***, and the local ***Department of Social Services*** were located in the same building when they received their initial 12 FUP certificates from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This shared location made communication between the two agencies easy. Staff could hold frequent face-to-face meetings to discuss issues, and families interested in the program could easily see staff from both agencies in one visit. The program has worked so well that the agency now has 39 FUP certificates under lease.

In **Montgomery County, Maryland**, the ***Housing Opportunities Commission (HOC) of Montgomery County*** had already established a local initiative similar to FUP before the federal program made a special allocation of certificates available. When local ***Child Welfare Department (CW)*** caseworkers complained that their clients were not being served, the two agencies discovered that many CW-referred families had either never applied for Section 8 assistance or had filed incomplete applications. Once the proper paperwork was completed, HOC was able to offer rental assistance to more than 30 families and reunite the parents with their children. Since then, HOC has received 35 FUP vouchers to supplement the housing assistance available to CW's client families, and the two agencies have taken the following steps to make the program work:

- HOC has developed a training session for child welfare caseworkers on Section 8 procedures.
- Designated agency staff members meet monthly to review the waiting list, identify eligible families, and ensure the necessary paperwork is completed.
- Child welfare caseworkers provide follow-up with families after they are housed, to make sure they have needed services and supports.

In **New Jersey**, cooperation between the ***Department of Community Affairs's (DCA)*** network of county housing agencies and the ***Division of Youth and Family Services (DYFS)*** has resulted

in three FUP allocations totaling 152 certificates distributed among 10 counties. To achieve this, the agencies have designated liaisons at both the state and county levels. Local advisory committees made up of service providers, county government, and other appropriate members help identify resources for participating families.

Local agency liaisons work together to identify eligible families; they have a common understanding of who is eligible and appropriate for the program. Criteria include acceptable credit histories, presence of young children in the family, and stabilization of any substance abuse problems.

Division of Youth and Family Services caseworkers attend the Section 8 briefing with new program participants and help with the housing search. A copy of the participant's case plan is provided to the housing representative to explain the family's circumstances and plans. The local liaisons also communicate after participants are housed, to provide any necessary follow-up. DCA's certified housing counselors are available to offer housing counseling to families who have problems with landlords, rent payment, or other housing issues.

For example, FUP helped a woman whose children had been placed in foster care while she was incarcerated. When she was released, a judge reviewing her custody request said her children would be returned if she found adequate housing. The housing and DYFS staff helped her find safe and affordable housing, and DYFS staff continued to follow-up after the family moved into its apartment.

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**VETERANS ADMINISTRATION SUPPORTIVE HOUSING (VASH):
COMBINING SECTION 8 ASSISTANCE WITH INTENSIVE SUPPORTIVE SERVICES
TO HOUSE HOMELESS VETERANS**

Together, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and HUD have collaborated to implement the Veteran's Administration Supportive Housing (VASH) program to address the needs of homeless veterans. The program combines VA supportive services with Section 8 housing assistance to help homeless veterans disabled by serious mental illness and/or substance abuse problems to live independently. VASH is an example of a creative way to link Section 8 assistance with other programs to serve a population with special needs.

THE CHALLENGE

Many veterans who have been homeless are not able to move directly into independent housing, even with intensive supportive services. They may have been homeless for prolonged periods. They may not have sought treatment for their substance abuse problems or mental illness. The program's primary challenge, therefore, is to ensure that all participants who enter the program are prepared for independent living, and that services are available to help them remain stable.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES

The two programs described here have addressed this challenge by requiring all applicants to demonstrate their commitment to rehabilitation and recovery before receiving assistance and by continuing to provide case management services to clients after they are housed.

In **West Haven, Connecticut**, the **VA's Connecticut Health Care System Homeless Programs** staff (which includes the two VASH case managers) identify potential applicants for the VASH program from among the veterans with whom they work. Applicants then are screened by a committee of Homeless Programs staff who look for evidence that the applicant is committed to rehabilitation and recovery.

To demonstrate commitment, all applicants must develop a treatment plan with a case manager, commit to doing 20 hours per week of productive activity (employment, training, education, or volunteer work), and begin attending weekly, one-hour housing group meetings. Participants

eligible for the VASH program must attend the housing group for three months before being referred to the **West Haven Housing Authority** for the housing subsidy.

Housing group meetings, which are open to all homeless VA clients regardless of whether they are enrolling in VASH, usually include 8 to 12 participants. Staff members lead discussions on topics such as the housing search process, landlord expectations, and community resources. During this three-month period, VASH applicants usually live either in a shelter or in a VA congregate living facility. Typically, four potential applicants begin attending the housing group each month. On average, one or two fulfill the pre-admission requirements and are referred to the housing authority.

After applicants complete the housing group requirement and are approved once again by the VASH screening committee, they meet with a VA case manager and the VASH coordinator from the West Haven Housing Authority to complete Section 8 paperwork. They then attend a Section 8 briefing and receive a housing certificate. Although the housing group meetings help prepare participants to conduct their own housing searches, the VASH case manager also helps the participant look for an apartment if necessary.

Case managers conduct home visits and monitor participants' progress after they are housed. Participants may continue to attend housing group meetings for two to four weeks after they move into their apartments. All participants have been invited back to speak to the group after they have been in their apartments for a few months. About half of the veterans are employed. A number work for the VA hospital, either in the semi-sheltered workshop program or in other jobs throughout the hospital. Seven veterans are employed in competitive jobs in the community, and four more are or have been enrolled in training programs.

HA and VA staff say the program has been very successful. Of the 50 vouchers issued to date (out of 60 allocated), 43 are currently leased. Only one participant has dropped out of the program and returned to the street. Recent success stories include one veteran who will soon regain custody of his two daughters. According to his case manager, he has been a responsible model parent and has been clean and sober for two years. The Section 8 voucher is a key factor in this veteran's ability to gain custody of his children. With the housing subsidy, he can afford safe, appropriate housing for his family.

In **San Bernadino County, California**, the VASH program for 75 participants is a joint effort of the ***Housing Authority of the County of San Bernadino*** and the ***Jerry L. Pettis Veterans Administration Medical Center***. VA staff members test applicant motivation through intake interviews conducted over several weeks on family history, education, and physical, psychological, and mental health.

Potential applicants are referred to the program by a VA medical center social worker doing outreach at shelters, soup kitchens, and other places where homeless veterans congregate. Applicants cannot receive Section 8 assistance until they have been clean and sober for five to six months. Most are already in treatment when they are referred; they must remain engaged in treatment to be accepted into the VASH program. The time from evaluation to move-in is about three months.

The VA staff provide housing search assistance, and a designated Section 8 staff person serves as the key contact for VASH clients at the housing authority. Staff from the two organizations have periodic meetings to review problems. VA case managers also provide intensive follow-up during the first few months the participant is housed. Participants initially attend two meetings per week -- one group meeting for new entrants and one individual session with a case manager. Typically, individual meetings with staff become less frequent and participants transfer to an issues group meeting that deals with such things as stress and anger management. However, the intensity of treatment depends on the needs of the individual.

About 100 people have been admitted to the program to date, and 75 are participating in the program now. Staff estimate six participants have graduated to unassisted housing and 20 have dropped out. Since the Section 8 income limit of \$23,000 is more than these primarily unskilled people can earn, participants tend to keep their housing assistance even after they are employed.

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